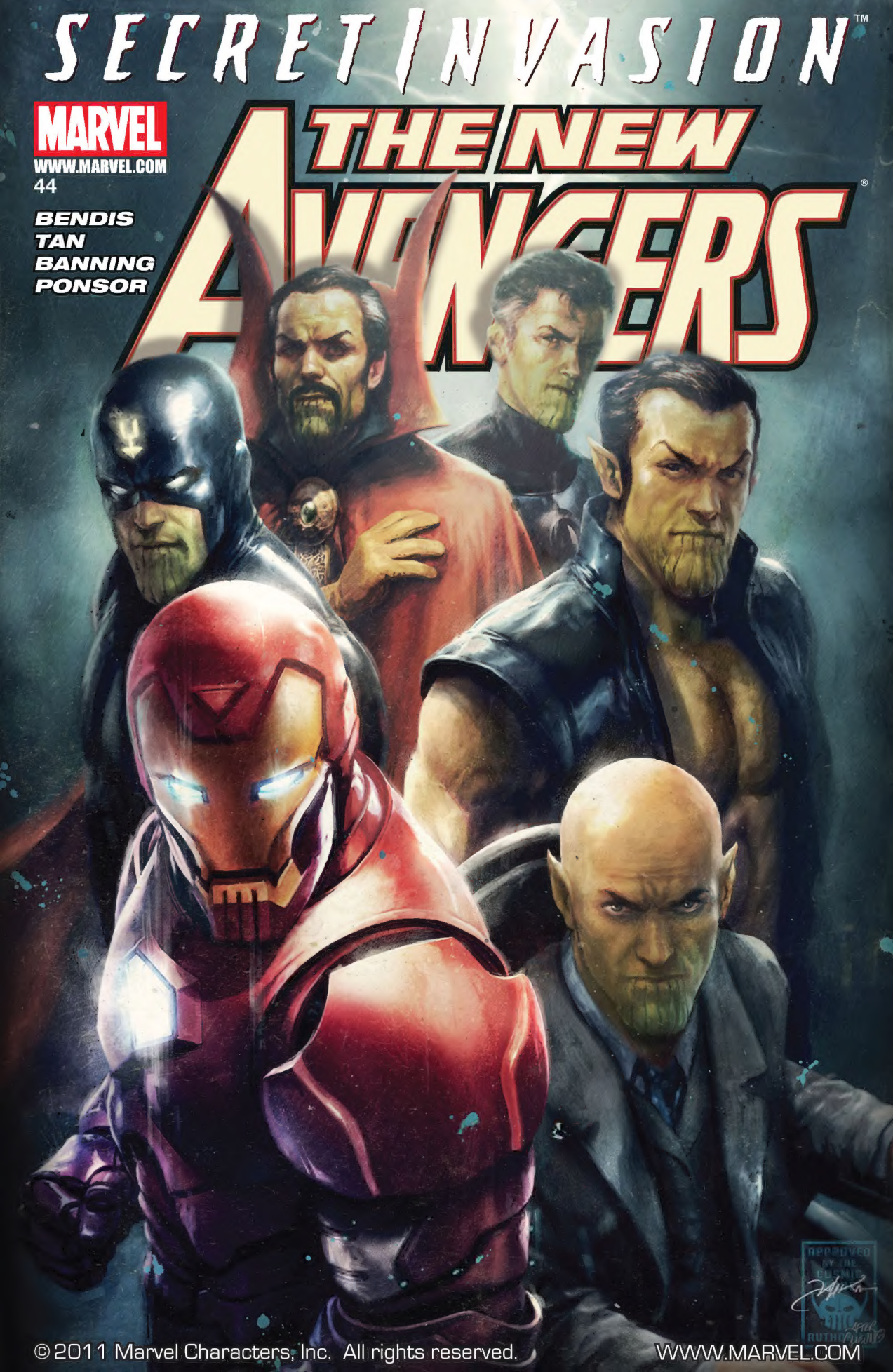

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And there came a day, a day unlike any other, when Earth's Mightiest Heroes found themselves united against a common threat! On that day, the Avengers were born, to fight the foes no single super hero could withstand!

THE NEW AVENGERS

The Illuminati is a secret organization comprised of several of the world's most powerful heroes: Sorcerer Supreme Doctor Strange; King of the Inhumans Black Bolt; founder of the X-Men and mutant rights activist Charles Xavier; founding member of the Fantastic Four Reed Richards; King of Atlantis Namor the Sub-Mariner; and founding member of the Avengers Iron Man a.k.a. Tony Stark.

These six men have secretly worked together to mold and shape the status of not only the superhuman world, but the civilian one as well.

Years ago, after the legendary Kree/Skrull war, the group traveled to the Skrull Throneworld to tell the shape-shifting alien race that they would not tolerate any more attempts at an Earth invasion.

Things did not go well. They were briefly detained, but eventually escaped.

Now, years later, we know that the Skrulls infiltrated Earth, an invasion masterminded by religious extremists who believe that the Earth is part of the Skrull empire.

But back then, who could be the wiser? And when there was no known means of detecting these new Skrulls, how could the Illuminati trust anyone to be who they seemed to be...including themselves?

BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS
WRITER

BILLY TAN
PENCILS

MATT BANNING
INKS

JUSTIN PONSOR
COLORIST

RS & COMICRAFT'S ALBERT DESCHESNE
LETTERER

ALEKSI BRICLOT
COVER ARTIST

JOE SABINO
PRODUCTION

JEANINE SCHAEFER
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

TOM BREVOORT
EDITOR

JOE QUESADA
EDITOR IN CHIEF

DAN BUCKLEY
PUBLISHER

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YEARS AGO

ARMOR.

GOOD MORNING, MISTER STARK.

ENVIRONMENT SCAN.

ATMOSPHERE, CONTENT, OR ATTENDANCE?

ATTENDANCE.

READING FIVE HUMANOID LIFE FORMS 100 FEET AHEAD.

WORLD'S BEST ACTION FIGURE

EVERYONE'S HERE.

SECURING IDENTITY FILES NOW.

THANK YOU.

ARMOR INFORMATION SYSTEMS
STEPHEN STRANGE
OCCUPATION: SORCERER SUPREME
IDENTITY: CONFIRMED

ARMOR INFORMATION SYSTEMS
REED RICHARDS
ALIAS: MISTER FANTASTIC
OCCUPATION: SCIENTIST, ADVENTURER
GROUP AFFILIATION: FANTASTIC FOUR
IDENTITY: CONFIRMED

GENTLEMEN...

ARMOR INFORMATION SYSTEMS
CHARLES FRANCIS XAVIER
OCCUPATION: MUTANT LEADER
GROUP AFFILIATION: X- MEN
IDENTITY: CONFIRMED

ARMOR INFORMATION SYSTEMS
BLACKAGAR BOLTAGON
ALIAS: BLACK BOLT
OCCUPATION: MONARCH OF THE INHUMANS
IDENTITY: CONFIRMED

HOW IS IT THAT I CAN GET HERE PROMPTLY, BUT YOU, WITH ALL YOUR TOYS, CAN NEVER SEEM TO?

SORRY, NAMOR, I NEED THAT EXTRA BIT OF TIME TO PUT ON SOME PANTS.

YOU WOULD *HAVE* TO.

ARMOR INFORMATION SYSTEMS
PRINCE NAMOR
ALIAS: SUB-MARINER
OCCUPATION: MONARCH
IDENTITY: CONFIRMED

THANK YOU FOR COMING, TONY.

I KNOW IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE WE GATHERED LIKE THIS, BUT I NEEDED TO SPEAK WITH YOU ALL.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM, CHARLES?

THE SKRULL SITUATION.

AGAIN?

NOT AGAIN.

BUT...

WE ARE TO BELIEVE THEY WILL RETALIATE, CORRECT?

IT'S THE SMART MONEY.

WHAT IF THEY ALREADY HAVE IS MY QUESTION.

DO YOU HAVE INFORMATION THAT THEY *MAY* HAVE--?!

I THINK OF OUR TIME THERE.

THEY CAPTURED US. BUT FOR HOW LONG?

COULD IT BE THAT ONE OF US WAS REPLACED? THAT ONE OR MORE OF US WAS SWITCHED OUT FOR ONE OF THEM?

I THOUGHT OF THAT TOO, OBVIOUSLY...

BUT I ASSUMED, CHARLES, WITH *YOUR* MUTANT PSYCHIC POWERS AND DOCTOR STRANGE'S ABILITIES AS MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS...

...PLUS OUR *TECH*...

I FIGURED WE HAD THAT COVERED.

UNLESS, EITHER OF *THEM* WERE SWITCHED...

WELL, OBVIOUSLY...

SO REALLY YOU DON'T KNOW WHO IS WHO OR WHAT IS WHAT.

NONE OF YOU KNOW *ANYTHING.*

TONY, YOUR ARMOR SCANS THE ROOM...

IT DID BEFORE I CAME IN HERE.

AS DID I.

I CAN CONJURE THE EYE OF AGAMOTTO. IT WILL SHOW US TRUTH.

AND, YES, ALL YOUR BRAIN PATTERNS READ CLEAN.

ALL THIS IS TRUE.

SO...?

SO THEY *KNOW* WE CAN DO THIS. *THIS* THEY KNOW.

SO WHAT IF THEY FOUND A WAY TO OVERCOME THIS OBSTACLE...

WHAT IF THEY HAVE FOUND A WAY TO WALK FREELY AMONG US?

WHAT IF THEY HAVE INFILTRATED US?

WHAT IF THEY SEEK REVENGE ON US FOR WHAT WE'VE DONE?

WHAT *WE'VE* DONE?

WHAT HAVE *WE* DONE?

WE DESTROYED THEIR THRONE CITY.

IN RETALIATION.

YES, YES, THIS IS-- *YES.*

I AM ASKING YOU, IF WE KNOW THEY *WANT* TO RETALIATE...

AND KNOWING THAT THEY KNOW WE ARE ABLE TO DETECT THEM...

HOW WOULD THEY GO ABOUT MAKING THEMSELVES *UNDETECTABLE* TO THOSE OF US WITH POWERS?

BECAUSE I BELIEVE THEY MAY ALREADY HAVE.

I MUST SAY, CHARLES. ONE COULD ARGUE THAT YOU'RE BEING RATHER PARANOID.

THEY TRIED TO START SOMETHING WITH US...AND FAILED.

THAT COULD BE THE END OF IT.

BUT IT WON'T BE.

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS TO BE A KING TO A PEOPLE.

THE PRESSURE TO DELIVER THAT WHICH IS PROMISED. THAT WHICH HAS BEEN FORETOLD.

THEY *WILL* COME HERE. THEY WILL SACRIFICE THEMSELVES TO BRING VICTORY.

I AGREE.

THE QUESTION IS: *HOW* WILL THEY DO IT?

THEORETICALLY.

WELL, OKAY...

OKAY...

LET ME THINK...

IT'S AN INTERESTING CONUNDRUM.

THERE *WAS* THAT SUPER-SKRULL THAT HAD YOUR POWERS. THE POWERS OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR.

YES. BUT THAT WAS MANUFACTURED. IT'S A TRICK.

YOU'D NEED TO, ON A GENETIC LEVEL, ALTER ONE'S SELF.

YOU'D NEED TO BE ABLE TO *HOLD* THE ILLUSION OF FORM ON A *MOLECULAR* LEVEL FOR AS LONG AS IT WOULD TAKE.

SHAPE-SHIFTING NOT JUST COSMETICALLY, BUT GENETICALLY.

ONE WOULD HAVE TO BE ABLE TO GENETICALLY SHAPE-SHIFT AND THEN *LOCK* THE FORM.

BUT AFTER THAT ANY SHAPE-SHIFT, ANY CHANGE, WOULD THEN MAKE ONE DETECTABLE TO PEOPLE LIKE US.

INTERESTING. COULD THIS BE DONE?

ANYTHING CAN BE DONE. IT'S A MATTER OF--

STRANGE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

I WILL CONJURE THE EYE OF AGAMOTTO. IT CAN BRING A LEVEL OF TRUST TO THIS ROOM.

AND THEN WE--

AND THEN WE---

UM.

I CAN'T SEEM TO DO IT.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU USED IT?
WE WERE...
ON THE SKRULL SHIP AND WE--
HOW DID WE ESCAPE THE SKRULL EMPIRE?
WE--
UM--
I--
I THINK WE'RE STILL--
I THINK WE'RE STILL THERE.

NO.
NO, WE--
WE GOT ON A TRANSPORT SHIP AND WE--
EVERYONE STOP.
STOP TALKING.

I--
I DON'T HAVE MY POWERS.
WHAT DOES THIS *MEAN?*
ARMOR?
ARMOR?
CODE LEVEL SITMA FIVE.
WHAT DOES THIS *MEAN?*
ARMOR?
OH, MAN...
IT MEANS WE SHOULD GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE.

PLEASE DON'T DO THAT, KREE-SPAWN.

WHAT IS THIS? HOW HAVE YOU DONE THIS?
SIT DOWN AND CALM DOWN.
IS THIS *YOUR DOING?* HAVE YOU *BETRAYED* US?
SIT DOWN.

BY ALL THAT I HOLD DEAR, I PROMISE YOU, YOU AND *YOUR ENTIRE FAMILY WILL PAY FOR--*
THIS EXPERIMENT IS TERMINATED.

BY THE VISHANTI--NO!
FACOOM
NOOO--!
ALL OF YOU, RUN!
GET UP AND RUN!
CRASH
AAGGHH!
HRRAAGH!
KOOM
NO.
FFSSAAAAMM
FFSSAAAAMM

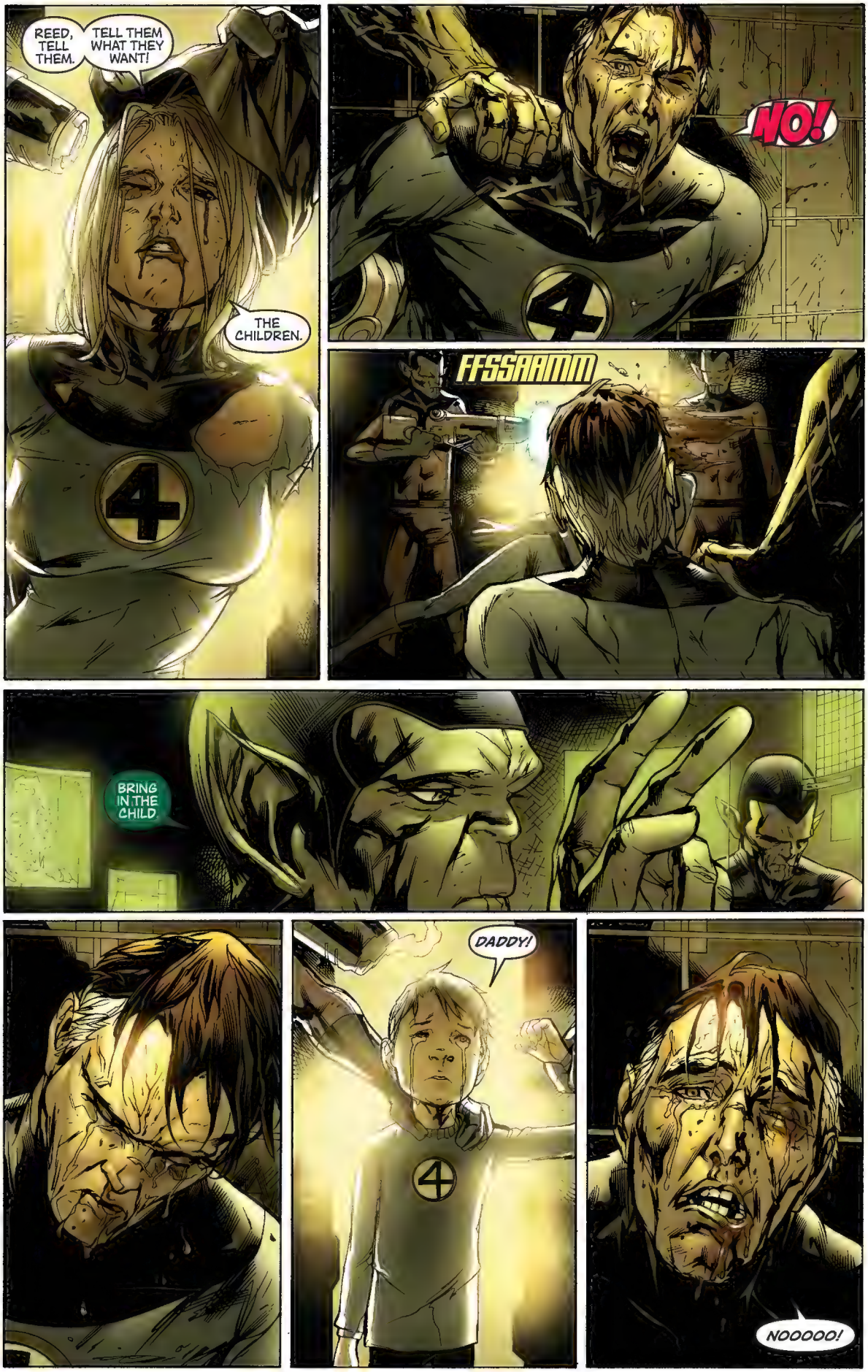
PRIEST OF THE SCIENCE...PLEASE NOTE IN MY NAME. SESSION 21 IS TERMINATED.
NAME IT WHAT IT IS-- A FAILURE.
IT WAS *NOT* A FAILURE.
THE CLONEPOD HUMAN DUPLICATIONS ARE TERMINATED. NO PROGRESS WAS MADE.
MY APOLOGIES, PRIEST GALAN...
YOU HAVE NOTHING TO APOLOGIZE FOR, WARRIOR. YOUR ORDERS WERE CLEAR.
WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE ME DO *NOW?*
YOU ARE HONORABLY DISMISSED, GOOD WARRIOR. WE WILL CALL FOR YOU IN ANOTHER TIME.
PROGRESS *WAS* MADE, PRIEST GALAN. WE NOW KNOW THAT THE--
STOP TALKING.
FRY'LU, WHY DID YOUR MENTAL PROJECTIONS FAIL ON THE MINDS OF THE CLONED HUMANS?
YOU WERE TO KEEP THE ILLUSION OF THEIR ESCAPE FROM THE EMPIRE COMPLETE.
MY APOLOGIES, BUT THE HUMAN MIND--
THEY *CHOSE* NOT TO ACCEPT THE ILLUSION.
TRUTH AS TOLD, HOLDING THE ILLUSION FOR ALL *SIX* OF THEM MAY HAVE HAMPERED MY ABILITY TO KEEP THE *PRECISENESS* OF THE MENTAL SUGGEST--
WHAT'S HAPPENED HERE?

MY KING.
I OFFER MY HUMBLEST, MOST SINCERE--
ONE WOULD GUESS THAT NO PROGRESS WAS MADE HERE.
WE WILL START THE CLONEPOD PROCESS AGAIN.
THAT YOU SHALL.
PROGRESS *WAS* MADE, YOUR HIGH--
DRO'GE! DO NOT SPEAK TO OUR KING OUT OF TURN!
SPEAK THAT WHICH YOU KNOW IS TRUE.
MY WORDS IN YOUR HONOR, SIR, THE CLONEPOD OF REED RICHARDS HAD SURMISED AN IDEA BY WHICH WE COULD PREVAIL.
THE INFORMATION FOR OUR SUCCESS IS IN HIS MIND.
BUT HE DIDN'T GET A CHANCE TO COMMIT IT BEFORE THE ILLUSION FAILED US.
YOUR HIGHNESS, YOUR EXCELLENCE, IF I MAY...
WE DON'T NEED TO DUPLICATE THE ENTIRE GROUP OF HUMANS.
WE ONLY NEED WHAT IS IN THE MIND OF REED RICHARDS.
I UNDERSTAND *WHY* YOU WANT US TO INTERROGATE THE ENTIRE GROUP.
THESE ARE THE GREATEST HUMAN ENEMIES OF THE SKRULL EMPIRE AND THEY MUST BE PUNISHED...
BUT THESE THINGS--THEY ARE NOT *REAL*. THEY ARE SYNTHETIC DUPLICATIONS.
WE CAN KEEP DUPLICATING THEM AND TORTURING THEM OVER AND OVER FOR AS LONG AS YOU'D LIKE...
WE CAN CREATE A REED RICHARDS CLONEPOD AND PUT IT IN YOUR CHAMBERS FOR YOU TO DO WITH AS YOU'D LIKE FOR AS LONG AS YOU'D LIKE...
BUT...

BUT THE EMPIRE NEEDS *ANSWERS* THAT WE DO NOT HAVE AND WE NOW KNOW THAT THE ANSWER IS IN THIS MIND.
WITH RESPECT TO YOUR THRONE--THE ONLY WAY TO DO THAT IS TO TAKE THE CLONED ILLUSION OF SELF TO A DIFFERENT STAGE.
MAY WE PLEASE, WITH YOUR ORDER, MOVE TO A NEW AREA OF EXPERIMENTATION TOWARDS THIS GOAL.
IF THE MIND OF REED RICHARDS HOLDS THE KEY TO OUR FUTURE...
WHY CANNOT YOU, THE PRIEST OF THE MIND, TAKE IT *OUT* OF HIS MIND?
BLESSED BE YOUR NAME...
I SIMPLY AM NOT SMART ENOUGH IN THE AREAS OF THE SCIENCES TO UNDERSTAND THE THOUGHTS IT IS THINKING.
THEY ARE BEYOND MY LEARNINGS.
IT IS FRUSTRATING THAT WE KNOW SO MUCH MORE THAN THESE MUD-WALKERS...
...AND YET THE ONE THING WE DO NOT KNOW, *HE* KNOWS.
BUT ONCE THE PUZZLE IS SOLVED...
THE IRONY THAT IT WAS THE MIND OF *REED RICHARDS* THAT BROUGHT THE SKRULL EMPIRE THE EARTH IN ITS ENTIRETY...
...WILL BE A *LEGEND* THAT IS SPOKEN OF TILL THE *END OF DAYS.*

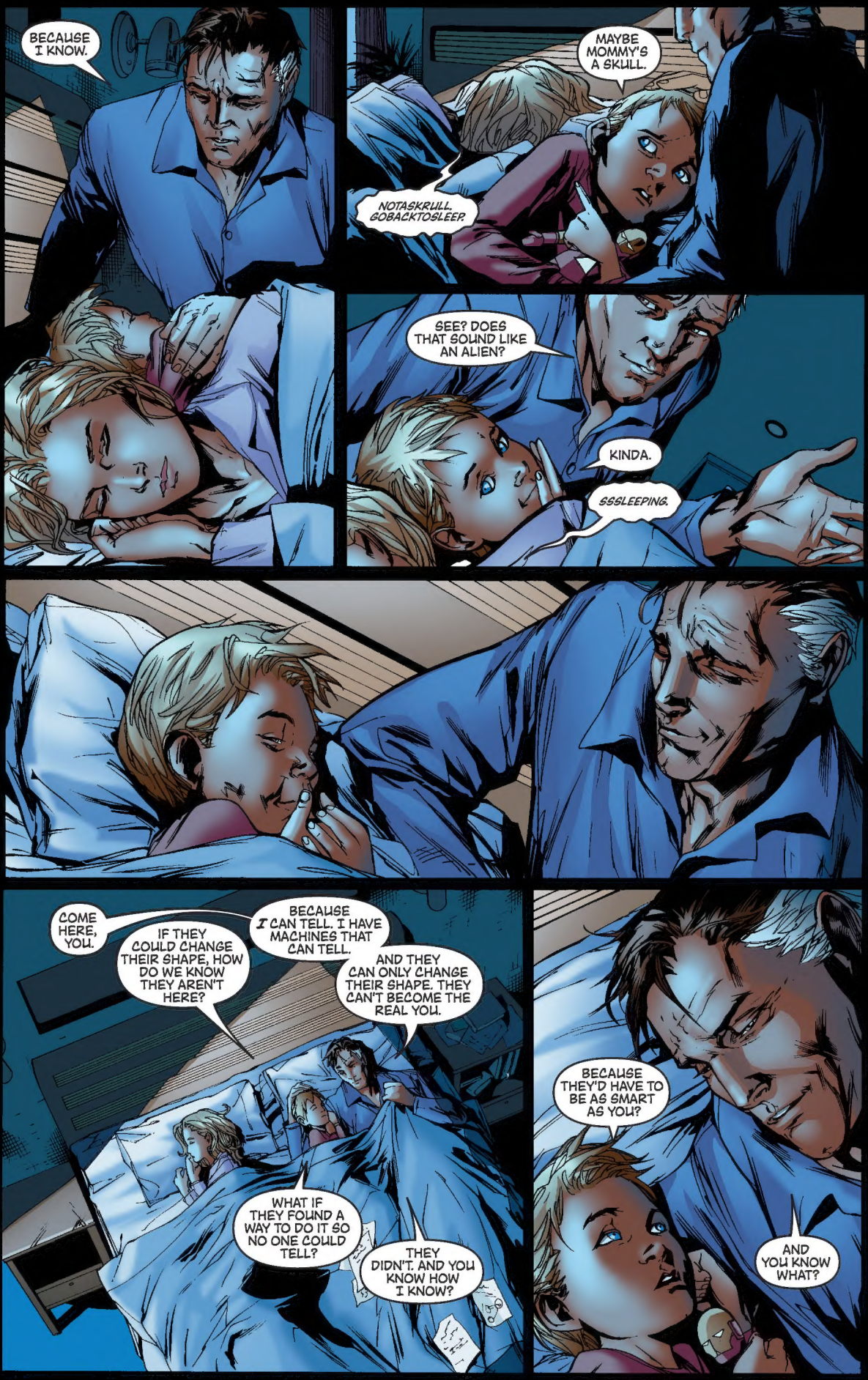
WHAT'S YOUR NAME, YOUNG PRIEST OF THE SCIENCES?
DRO'GE FENU EDU.
YOU ARE NOW THE *HEAD* PRIEST OF THE SCIENCE FOR THIS PROJECT.
THAT IS NOT NECESSARY, SIR, BUT IF IT IS YOUR WORD--
IT IS.
THEN IT IS MY HONOR TO MAKE IT SO.
MY APOLOGIES, GALAN.
YOU UNDERSTAND... YOU ARE ONE OF *HIS* MEN NOW.
YOU ARE *HIS* PICK.
HE'LL HAVE YOU BANISHED IF YOU FAIL.
WE'LL NEED SOMETHING NEW.

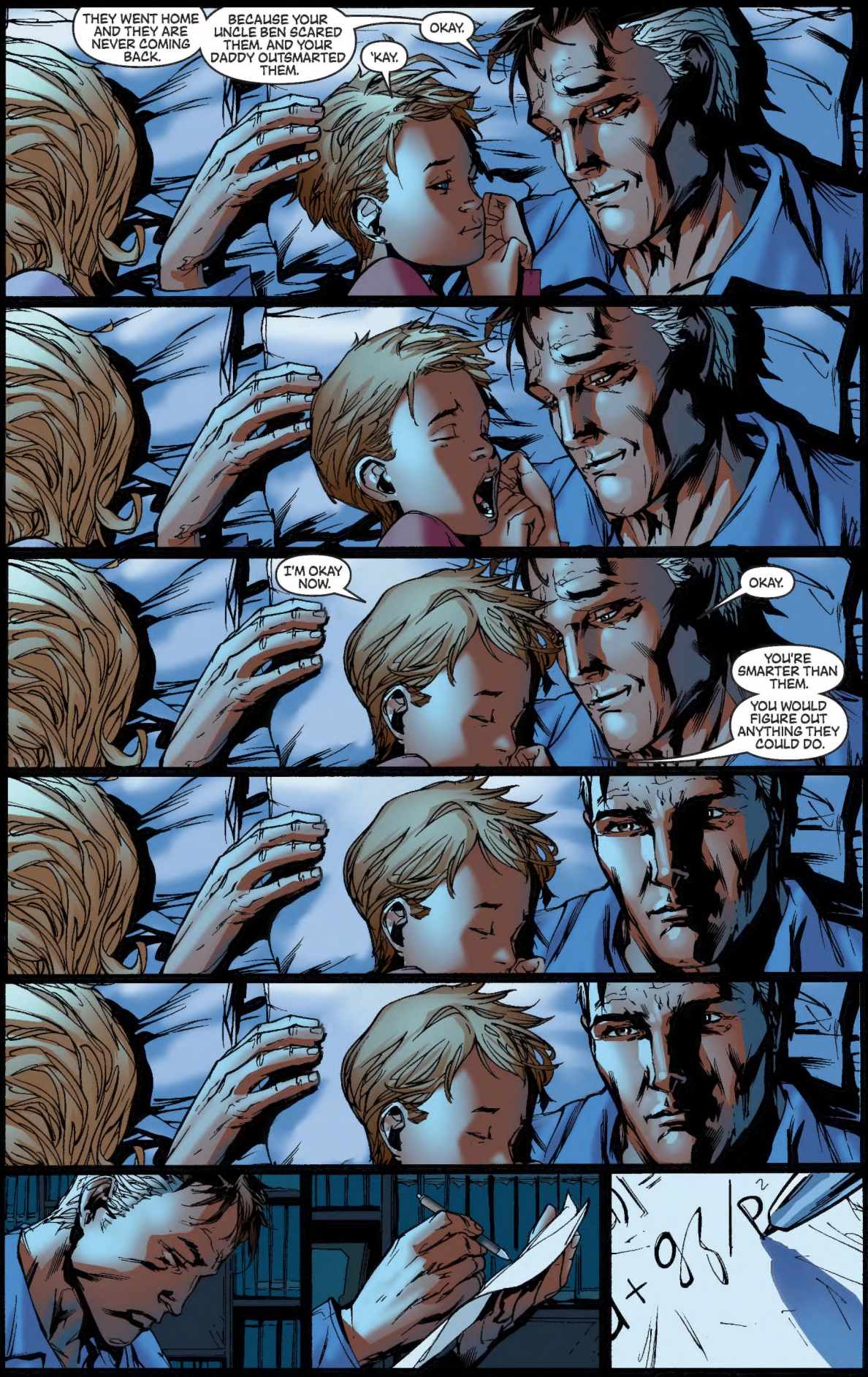
UGH...
CRACK
TELL THEM WHAT THEY ASKED AND YOU WILL LIVE. TELL THEM.
=COFF=
=COFF=
YOUR POWERS CAN'T HELP YOU HERE, HUMAN!
WE'VE NEUTRALIZED THEM. IF I HIT YOU AGAIN, YOU'LL DIE!
=COFF=
THEN I'LL DIE.
BRING THE FEMALE.
MMHHRR!


REED, TELL THEM.
TELL THEM WHAT THEY WANT!
THE CHILDREN.
NO!
FFSSRRMM
BRING IN THE CHILD.
DADDY!
NOOOOO!

DADDY!
YOU TELL US HOW A SKRULL COULD GO UNDETECTED ON EARTH! YOU TELL US HOW!
OKAY! O-OKAY!
I'LL T-TELL YOU. I'LL TELL YOU ANYTHING.
BUT YOU LET MY CHILD GO!
HE IS TELLING A FALSEHOOD.
HE IS ALREADY PLANNING TO RELEASE A CHEMICAL-BASED WEAPON THAT WILL INSTANTLY KILL EVERYONE HERE.
YOU LEAVE MY CHILD ALONE!
END THIS.
BY YOUR WORD.
WILL NOTHING BREAK HIM?
I'M AT A LOSS TO UNDERSTAND THIS SPECIES' MOTIVATIONS.
SMACK
THERE IS ANOTHER WAY.
IT WILL REQUIRE SOMETHING SUBTLE.

FRANKLIN?
DADDY, I CAN'T SLEEP.
COME HERE, BUDDY. WHAT'S THE MATTER?
I KEEP THINKING ABOUT THE ALIENS.
ALIENS?
I HEARD UNCLE JOHNNY TALKING TO UNCLE BEN.
THERE'RE NO ALIENS HERE.
THE SKRULLS.
YEAH? WHAT DID UNCLE JOHNNY SAY?
HE SAID THEY CAN CHANGE THEIR SHAPE SO THEY LOOK LIKE US.
WELL, THAT'S NOT SOMETHING YOU NEED TO--
HE SAID THEY *HATE* YOU. HE SAID THEY WERE GOING TO COME HERE AND TAKE YOU AWAY.
WELL, THEY ARE VERY, VERY FAR AWAY AND THEY CAN'T GET IN HERE, H.E.R.B.I.E. WILL SEE TO THAT.
HOW DO YOU KNOW?! HOW DO YOU KNOW THEY AREN'T HERE ALREADY?


BECAUSE I KNOW.
MAYBE MOMMY'S A SKULL.
NOTASKRULL. GOBACKTOSLEEP.
SEE? DOES THAT SOUND LIKE AN ALIEN?
KINDA.
SSSLEEPING.
COME HERE, YOU.
IF THEY COULD CHANGE THEIR SHAPE, HOW DO WE KNOW THEY AREN'T HERE?
BECAUSE I CAN TELL. I HAVE MACHINES THAT CAN TELL.
AND THEY CAN ONLY CHANGE THEIR SHAPE. THEY CAN'T BECOME THE REAL YOU.
WHAT IF THEY FOUND A WAY TO DO IT SO NO ONE COULD TELL?
THEY DIDN'T. AND YOU KNOW HOW I KNOW?
BECAUSE THEY'D HAVE TO BE AS SMART AS YOU?
AND YOU KNOW WHAT?


THEY WENT HOME AND THEY ARE NEVER COMING BACK.
BECAUSE YOUR UNCLE BEN SCARED THEM. AND YOUR DADDY OUTSMARTED THEM.
OKAY.
'KAY.
I'M OKAY NOW.
OKAY.
YOU'RE SMARTER THAN THEM.
YOU WOULD FIGURE OUT ANYTHING THEY COULD DO.

WHAT IS THAT?
SOMETHING FRANKLIN MADE ME THINK OF.
SOMETHING THE SKRULLS COULD DO TO THEMSELVES IF THEY EVER--
IS THAT IT?
IS THAT WHAT?
HE THINKS SO.
TERMINATE THE PROGRAM.
BY YOUR WORD.
FFSSAAAAMM

I NEED A CLEANSING.
AYE. THAT WAS DISTASTEFUL.
WE BID YOU WELL, WARRIORS. YOU MAY GO.
BY YOUR WORD.
IS THAT IT?
IS IT?
HE TRULY LOVES US.
THE EMPIRE WILL LIVE.
NEXT: HOUSE OF M